

l'ama scraped along the cave walls, I closed on her, having to walk sideways so they didn't get wedged in. Her troupe of children a whole Fall younger than her walking more comfortably behind her. She was the only person older than three Leviathan falls short enough to fit inside this tunnel. So she was picked as the leader nearly a Weather Fall festival ago, to lead the children to mine the Frost Spear crystals for the Black Spear sect.

The children were mostly orphans so the Sect didn't have to pay their relatives a sum when they died. If they weren't orphans they were from families desperate enough to send their children to the mines for even the little amount of money the job gave them. But that didn't matter to her, she would bring them back home with only the scratches from walking this agonizing distance underground.

They walked onward, the only sound of footsteps and breathing, the noise amplified by the walls and silence to a deafening pitch. The sound was like something was standing directly behind her, breathing into her ear as she shuffled along the stone.

Like she could never be alone, always trapped with something behind her in the infinite walk along the stone walls that she swore was just a little wider not long ago. The panic started in the depths of her stomach, slowly and slowly growing every second, starting to push everything else. Pushing at the very edges of her skin and scalp, raising the hairs on them, just needing to explode out into screaming. Screeching that would scratch her throat bloody, and break her ears as they reverberated off the walls, echoing into the nothingness beyond and before.

No, no, she had to stay calm, the kids were looking up to her, and if she panicked they would too, but she was also sure they were feeling the same. So she gave small reassurances and small talk that felt like they were doing nothing for her, but she could feel the tension in the air ease.

As the three kids talked l'ama saw beyond the dim cold light from their Sea Pearl lanterns like she was ten or so feet under the ocean surface. There was a shining star of sharp white light coming from a crack in the stone beyond.

"Look, it's not far beyond," l'ama called out.

The kids let out some small cheers that echoed into a full hurrah made by a crowd.

They shuffled faster onward enthusiastically, pushing l'ama to go faster till they made it to their prize. A small cavern filled with pillars of snow-white crystals holding up the ceiling in an architect's nightmare. With sharp bursts of crystals all around the place like porcupines illuminating the cavern in dim winter light. The Sea Pearl lanterns still pierced through the crystals, refracting and reflecting off each other. Looking like a kaleidoscope of water reflections, but with straight and ridged lines refusing to bend instead of the flowing bubbles of water.

As the last one popped out of the tunnel l'ama rounded them up, reminding them of the rules, "Number one don't ever touch the crystals with your bare skin, like glass you'll see the cut before you feel. Number two always have someone else check your harness before descending. Number three don't ever mess around with someone descending while holding the rope, do you all get this?"

An out-of-sync reply of random agreement greeted her, l'ama not expecting a better reply indicated for them to start up work.

l'ama pulled the rope through her harness, getting Koi'u to check it, then having him be the person holding the rope connected to a pin hammered into the stone. She descended, using a small one-handed hammer with a pointy end to break off the crystals, putting it into a bag about the size of her fists put together hanging off her waist. Made of magically treated leather that was from the same stuff that all her mining clothes were.

After filling the bag she called up to Koi'u to pull her up to the stone lip, getting one knee up she heard and felt a deep rumbling from the stone. Then something in a burst of dust and rubble exploded from the wall directly behind the black-haired boy pulling her up. When the dust cleared she saw a human-sized worm the color of old laundry water with jagged white crystal teeth, snow white hairs covering its body eating the boy.

Everything from the shoulders up inside its mouth, leaking blood and gore, it started to inch forward, its maw opening wide. The two remaining children screamed, backing away towards the ledge, and the thing turned to them faster than it looked like it should with its bulk. l'ama got her last knee up, scrambling onto her feet as fast as she could.

As the thing started to slither its way over to the children she grabbed it with her gloved free hand, Trying to pull it back. She fell onto her but, looking at her left hand, she saw that the leather was ripped off, then looking at the worm she saw that leather was sticking onto it. It seemed like the hairs had held onto it, "wait a minute the hairs are made of the same stuff as the damned Spear crystals, and its teeth to"

The gloves were meant to withstand one or three crystals poking at it gently, not dozens at the same time, so she couldn't even touch the thing, great. The worm looked at her even with no eye, then it started to coil up into what looked like a charge. I'ama pushed herself back onto her feet, calling her Spirit Avatar, a nearly invisible wispy bow, and arrow, only a faint green light indicating it even existed.

She got a shot off at the thing, leaving behind a slightly blackened spot that started smoking. It let out a horrible screech that sounded like a dozen knives scraping against a thin sheet of metal. Then it charged at nearly blinding speed, but she was able to dive to the side before it hit her, and then it slammed into the wall with a boom.

It stayed dead still at the wall, looking stunned, not wasting time I'ama got to her knees, calling back her Spirit Avatar, but only the arrow. Stabbing it into the same place, hoping was its head, but all it did was leave behind a big black, sizzling mark. And the thing seemed to wake up from its nap with the same but weaker screech.

She reached for the satchel at her waist with her right hand, it turned towards her, launching itself at her head. She stabbed it in the same spot as earlier with a crystal, pinning it to the ground, holding it as it thrashed around. Letting out a pathetic screech and one last attempt to escape its death, then it turned slightly pale, an ethereal form rising from its corpse.

I'ama summoned her arrow again, stabbing into the Remnant, killing it again, a small white-grey bead dropping to the ground. As the Remnant dissipated into nothing. I'ama grabbed the bead as it rolled away, holding the milky white marble up to the light, letting it shine through it. A core, she could sell this for quite a bit, maybe she could afford tickets for her and her sister to the matches at the Weather Fall festival.

Depths, was that all she was thinking about, tickets, somebody just died, a kid of all things. I'ama heard crying from behind her, she turned around and saw the two remaining kids shaking. Stop thinking of yourself, you have people to take care of, she shook her head, getting off her knees. Pocketing the bead while walking past the gore pile of the corpse.

She comforted them, taking an hour, or two, maybe only half an hour, it was so hard to tell time below the suns, in the bowels of the earth. Only a speck of dust inside a crack in a rock, banishing the thoughts I'ama was able to bring the children back to the surface.

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“Not making quota, that’s a 20% deduction to all of you, letting a member die, that another 20% off your paycheck, Uh?” the grizzled middle-aged failure of a man Yu’oku trailed off.

“I’ama,” she replied clenching her fist, trying not to grind her teeth to dust.

“Yeah right, I’ama. And another 10% off your paycheck for damaging your equipment.”

“Will that be all?” she said, letting out a breath that she didn’t know she was holding.

“Yep, please don’t waste my time like this again in the future.”

“Yes sir.”

Yu’oku walked with his back hunched over to the small dingy mildewing building holding his office.

I’ama walked in the same direction and bumped into him, pocketing a large bronze coin from him without Yu’oku noticing. The man grilled her out, for disrespecting him but she was used to it considering he almost always found a way to do this to somebody. She rode the man’s stormy temper out, bowing and placating, till they walked on their ways.

I’ama heard Yu’oku mumble, “Cursed orphan,” behind her

She flinched, her heart fluttered for a moment but reminded herself that no one knew, all he was doing was insulting her, that was all.

OOO

I’ama opened the door to the Black Spear miner’s housing, provided by the sect if you paid for it with miner Tokens. Little coins made from Black Spear ice, which only the Black Spear sect could make. You could choose to be paid in those, or get two Bronze bits for a month of work, so most people choose the tokens that could also be used in the Sect store. The only stores that would exchange the tokens, and they kept it up by being the only major group that would pay orphans.

Most businesses wouldn’t even consider an orphan if there was even a slight chance they’re a cursed orphan connected to the Leviathan. Like her and her sister, speaking of her sister Ma’u ran up to her, smothering her in a hug, I’ama pushed her little sister away to breathe. Looking up at her since she was a foot taller than her even though she was a full Leviathan fall younger than I’ama.

“Oh, thank the Vast that you’re ok, I heard that someone got killed in your troupe!”

“Oh, that, don’t worry about it.”

l’ama walked past her sister to the kitchen/dining/bedroom of the apartment, with a single dingy wooden window and an old lamp lighting the single room of the whole apartment.

“But you could’ve been hurt.”

“Yeah, I’m your older sister, that means I’m invincible, I mean look at my impeccably beautiful face.”

Ma’u looked l’ama up and down, and said with a straight face, “You look like a swamp hag on a third marriage after eating the first two.”

“I am hurt,” l’ama dramatically put a hand on her chest.

They bantered back and forth, l’ama getting her sister’s mind off the accident, they made dinner together, a watery porridge with some vegetables and dried meat from the Sect store. They sat down on cushions at the table, unable to afford proper chairs, after a few minutes of eating l’ama brought up the surprise she’d been saving since the mine.

“So, you know the Weather fall festival.”

“Oh, yeah, what about it?” she shoveled a spoon of the porridge into her mouth, wiping off the grains on her cheek with her sleeve.

“I can afford the tickets for the matches.”

Ma’u nearly spit out her food, choking on it instead, while l’ama grinned like a villain in some cheesy puppet show.

After finally getting enough air said, “How in the Depths did you get enough money?”

“Well you know, killing a sacred beast or two can get you some real money while down in the mines,” l’ama said, sidestepping the fact she stole most of it. Though the Remnant bone would help.

“Wait you kill a sacred beast, how?”

“Don’t worry, it was probably only 10 falls old or so.”

“Where did you even kill... oh,” she trailed off, realization on her face.

“Oh don’t look so shocked,” I’ama said with faux indignation in her voice.

They spent another half hour talking about how their days went, Ma’u worked in the administrative parts of the mine since she could read. She had taught herself including math, which allowed her a higher position than usually possible for someone outside the Sect. I’ama was always delighted by her sister’s abilities, but could never understand how she would read script, characters were easy, they’re just stylized pictures so you could just guess even if you didn’t recognize it. But script was just nonsensical scribbles loosely put together with no rhyme or reason.

With Reaper setting, the only light illuminating the room being the dim fuzzy warm Sea Bronze lamp let above them, I’ama closed the window and Ma’u reached up towards the ceiling to switch off the lamp. They went to thin bunk beds that you would feel the wood under you while you slept, but when I’ama laid down Ma’u tugged on I’ama’s shirt.

“Can I sleep with you tonight?”

“You haven’t done that in a while, there any reason?”

“No,” she rejected, looking away

“Come here,” I’ama opened her arm.

Ma’u got onto the cot, laying down on I’ama’s chest

“What was it, you don’t have to tell me now or ever, I just want to know.”

A couple of moments went by, the only sound of them breathing. The drowsy abyss of sleep started to take I’ama, and then Ma’u talked with a slight quaver in her voice, “I just want to know if you’re there, you know.”

“I see,” she didn’t but it was better to say so to calm her down instead of drawing out her emotions.

I’ama felt Ma’u’s tears on her chest and started to scratch her head till once again sleep found her.

OOO

l'ama felt the grit and filth of the cold stone floor bite into her knees, her hands tied behind her back with jagged rusted chains. Her arms pulled up so that it jammed her shoulders, making her bow down, unable to move without pain screeching from her body in every direction.

Blinding lights turned on directly at her eyes, blinding her, forcing her to squint to see anything properly, moving her head up she saw a king in crimson red with a steel mask mimicking a human face. In front of its throne was a giant scale with a green-eyed judge on top of it, inside a wooden box, holding a gavel.

Eyes watering, l'ama forced her eyes to look past the piercing light and see what was on the scales, on the left she saw her sister tied to a pole. On the right two rotting corpses standing, flesh rotting and falling off in black and green festering strips covered in puss and black blood. One was a short black-haired man, the other was a woman with her entire middle rotted off, from below the ribs to the hips, taller than the man by more than a head.

The two zombies started to speak in bubbling slurs of speech that only made half sense to l'ama's ears, but one thing was entirely apparent to her, "She killed us, she cursed us, we gave that thing life and it ate away at us like a Leviathan to the Sea Mother."

l'ama tried to speak but a gag crusted with black filth and hadn't been cleaned since it was made was tied around her mouth, crimson hands tying the knot. She tried to move forward and break her chains, but it did nothing and the Crimson King raised its hand and spoke.

"The Jester shall not speak, nor move," It said with no words

So she did not.

The dead kept on speaking, every sentence said the Judge banged its gavel against the wood, the smooth coal black wood, splintering it. And the side of the scales Ma'u was on lowered, a brazer of green flame the same acid green the Judges eyes was lit beneath Ma'u. Each hit of the gavel lowered Ma'u closer to the hungry flames, licking at her skin, leaving black scars, while l'ama keeled crying and bleeding from her knees and hands and eyes. The crimson blood only cared to be spilled for the Crimson King as the innocent child burned in napalm flame, as the Jester bathed in yellow light knelled helpless.

OOO

l'ama jolted up from sleep clammy, accidentally headbutting Ma'u, sending her walking backward.

“Ow, what was that for?!” she asked holding a hand up to the red spot she got headbutted

“Sorry, sorry,” I’ama said catching her breath, “Just a bad dream, and you uh, startled me.”

“Must’ve been one bad one.”

“Yeah,” she said then realized she didn’t actually remember any of it, it was really weird, well it was a dream, what was weird about that?

She shook her head and started to get ready for the day.